



A Trip to the Merino Muster

The first thing you notice about New Zealand is the light. Then it's the clear air, the water, even the coffee. And of course the New Zealanders themselves – the most overtly friendly bunch you'd find anywhere! There is a lot more to a trip to the Muster than just another 42km of awesome corduroy. The idea was to make a little extra use of all that fitness that you develop as you prepare for the Hoppet, so I'd had this planned from way back in February. Len Budge was also there for the event so we teamed up for skiing in the days ahead of the race.

After another magnificent Hoppet day this year, it was exciting to fly into Queenstown and see snow covered peaks on all sides. Perhaps we would have Hoppet-like conditions in New Zealand.. On Tuesday morning, however, we drove up into the cloud at the Snow Farm and joined another Aussie John Joyce for a ski around the first half of the course with limited visibility. At least the great facilities right there on the snow made it easy to organise our gear and get going. Not as easy, however, was finding the course, which is somewhat convoluted and full of intersections. And it was no good asking the others out on the trails – they were pretty much all internationals like us. The tracks were in good nick, the cloud lifted from time to time and so after 21km we felt we had found our ski legs. So we returned to our digs in beautiful Wanaka, an easy 35 minute drive in our little hire car. There is accommodation at the Snow Farm itself, but this was already booked out for that week by the time I enquired in February!



Day off Wednesday to do some touring, and then back on Thursday – this time in brilliant conditions that made finding our way around the second loop a little easier. We skied the second loop – super trails with a few steep pinches, and not a lot of flat – and got a good look at the lovely backcountry away from the resort. Once again we stopped after just 21km, wanting to keep some in reserve for the event. There was plenty to do as the skiing was interspersed with social functions to attend, one each in Wanaka, Snow Farm and Cardrona, It made for an interesting week as we mixed with the others gathering for the race.

Friday was a day for waxing skis and mostly resting, so by the time Saturday came around we lined up at the start with legs full of skiing. Just like for our Hoppet this year, the conditions were perfect! There were only about 130 at the Muster Start, so the crowd thinned out pretty quickly and we soon settled into a rhythm. As is usual in this sort of event I found myself skiing with one or two others for much of the event. One, a German, had rocket skis and would re-



pass me on the downs; another made no stops at the drink stations and would slip through there, and yet another, a new Zealander, was always that little bit out in front. With the constant twists and turns the kms slid by and the finish line actually arrived a few minutes earlier than it had in the Hoppet the previous week. Len had missed one of the turns at the halfway mark and hence got in a bit of extra skiing, so he arrived about ten minutes later.

Apart from meeting lots of friendly people, including many fellow Aussies, and enjoying some great skiing I was pretty happy to discover that I'd won my age class (just!) and would be taking home a lovely fluffy Merino lamb called Shaun.

I would recommend this event to other Aussies – especially if you can tack on a bit of touring as we did. My wife, Jen and I drove north during the week following the race and found any number of wonderful views, walking tracks and MTB trails to be further explored at a later date!

Bob Flower
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